



The
Trouble With
Hamlet

by
Alessa

The Trouble With Hamlet

by Alessa

"Hey!!"

I refused to look up. *Keep your focus on the textbook, Emily*, my mind screeched and my heart pounded as I recognised the voice.

That same voice was what got me into trouble last time.

Instead, I ignored her attempts to grab my attention and just kept on reading the chapter due for tomorrow. English always gave me a hard time, and I wanted to finish it as soon as possible.

"Eeeeeemilyyyy!!"

Her voice trailed, drawing out my name. I tried to keep my eyes on the pages. But try as I might, the thought of her would not leave my mind. My eyes began to wander while my finger still traced the words in the book.

Peeking to my right, the fading afternoon light nearly blinded me as it shone through the windowpane. It cast a silhouette on my classmate, leaving her almost glowing in the fading daylight. A line of vacant chairs stood as a barrier, separating me from the only other person present in this empty classroom. The very same person who landed me here in the first place.

She was a girl with a mischievous stare cast in my direction, long, wavy blonde hair and striking blue eyes, shining like sapphires. I snorted, determined not to be swayed by her tricks once again. I returned to my book, but the feeling of her gaze lingered, making it hard to focus. She narrowed her eyes, unamused. It annoyed me that her ever-present grin never left her face.

"Don't pretend you can't hear me, Emily."

I sighed and tried to distract myself with something else. I reached for my phone in an attempt to make her think I was busy, but she saw right through my ploy.

"I can see your phone is off, so it's no use trying to ignore me."

"Can't you see I'm trying to work on something?" I replied indignantly.

"You mean your chapter?" she said, smirking. "That's not due until next week. You can relax a bit."

"Dylan, even if that's true, if the teacher comes in—"

"The teachers are all gone. We can talk."

I rolled my eyes. Dylan could be pushy, sometimes to the point where it was better to just humour her. It was never something that repelled me from her, but I had to wonder where she drew the line.

Regardless, I was getting nowhere with my reading. My mind was a muddled mess of words and thoughts. Maybe it was better to clear the air between us instead.

"Why would I want to do that, Dylan?"

She sighed, acknowledging my point. Dylan was spirited, but she wasn't oblivious to her own nature.

"Okay, I'll admit that it's my fault. But if you hadn't screamed so loudly when I touched your leg in class, we wouldn't be here."

"Why exactly did you do that? What do you want from me?"

"What do you mean?" Dylan giggled, narrowing her eyes. "Isn't it obvious? I'm interested in you, silly!"

My cheeks flushed at the reason she gave me, and I tried to focus on my book again, but her words kept echoing in my mind. Dylan and I had been classmates for some time, but I never really thought of her in that way, nor did I ever imagine she would be interested in me.

She was often seen with the popular crowd at school. She was also actively involved in various sports clubs, excelling in tennis and basketball, and she had a reputation as a sporty, active girl. On top of that, she consistently made it to the school's honour roll with good grades.

I, on the other hand, was more reserved—a typical schoolgirl who preferred keeping to herself and focusing on her studies. I didn't join any clubs or play any sports, and my routine usually involved going straight home after school. Any other girl would kill to be talking to one of the more popular girls like Dylan, but I was never one to care about social status.

Why, then, would Dylan land herself in detention, let alone show interest in me, was beyond me. Compared to her, I was no more than a shadow.

"You're really cute when you're flustered, Emsy," Dylan teased, scooting closer to me. "Makes me want to... mess with you."

I swallowed nervously. "Is... that a threat?"

Dylan chuckled and suppressed her laughter. "Oh, come on! You take *everything* as if it's some kind of sneaky attack. Calm down, would you? I'm not trying to trick you or anything. Pinky swear—"

She extended her pinky to me as a gesture to show her sincerity. As much as I tried not to admit it, there was something intriguing about Dylan's unpredictable nature. At least talking to her made the time in detention go by.

With a bit of hesitation, I extended my own pinky, forming a little chain with hers to seal the "pinky swear" deal. But Dylan was not content with just that. She immediately noticed the bracelet on my wrist and its faded rainbow colours.

"Interesting colours," she said, intrigue reflecting in her voice. "Would I be correct if I assumed..."

The burning sensation on my face extended all the way to my ears. Why did I expect her to be anything but forward? And why hadn't I anticipated her taking such an interest in my bracelet? I had only spoken with her on one occasion before, but it was never anything particularly noteworthy. She seemed like a normal girl. But now, she seemed to be probing too deeply, and I couldn't help but wonder if she was trying to embarrass me.

"It's not what you think." I quickly pulled the sleeve over my wrist to cover the bracelet.

Dylan giggled. Whether that was in amusement or derision was uncertain, but I brushed it off and tried to focus on my book. Instead, she just scooted closer until our arms were almost touching, and peered at the open pages on my desk.

"Hamlet. You know, I never understood what the fuss was all about with this play," she mused aloud. "I read it last year in seventh grade. It's just a couple of famous lines and a long, meandering story."

"What do you mean? It's one of Shakespeare's greatest works."

"Mmmh... I wouldn't say that. For one, Hamlet doesn't even do anything for most of the play. He just ruminates and ponders on the nature of existence like anyone could give a crap about what he's saying. When he found out his uncle killed his father, he should have just offed him right then and there."

"Well, that wouldn't make for an interesting play, would it? Hamlet focuses more on its characters than its plot. It's named after him for a reason."

Dylan pouted. I sensed I was getting a bit too smart for her liking. I felt a surge of confidence, as if she were challenging me to keep up with her teasing.

But then again, she did promise not to trick me or anything. Although she had a mean streak, I knew she valued things like honesty and keeping one's word. Perhaps there is more to her than meets the eye. I could tell there would be another time for her games anyway. Maybe, just maybe, she could even help me understand the play better. After all, we were both assigned to read it.



I sighed.

Detention seemed to be becoming a regular thing for us now. How long has it been since the last time? This was the third time we found ourselves in this situation. But then again, I could think of worse things than spending time alone with Dylan. She was anything but boring; just very... forward. Sometimes I had to wonder if this was all some elaborate prank. After all, why would someone like Dylan want to hang out with someone like me? I didn't stand out among the crowd. I wasn't particularly rich, nor was I good at sports.

So why?

This time, I was determined to get some answers. Genuine, satisfactory answers.

"We're back here again!" she chirped happily from across the classroom, as if we had arrived at an all-you-can-eat ice cream buffet. "Just you and me, Em."

"Lucky us," I replied, my tone tinged with sarcasm. "It's almost as if you planned for us to end up in detention together."

Dylan grinned playfully, seemingly pleased with my response. What on earth was going through her mind?

"You're smarter than you look, Emster. I guess it should be expected, though. You do pretty well for yourself in English."

"Thanks. Listen, if this is your way of wanting to spend time with me, fine. But please, no more pranks like last time."

"Oh, come on," Dylan chuckled, brushing off my concerns. "You can't deny you didn't enjoy it. Besides, who wouldn't want attention from a cute girl like me?"

I blushed at her remark and quickly looked away, turning my attention to the book on my desk. Was she really flirting with me? It had to be some sort of joke, right? It just had to. Today, I was going to find out the truth, one way or another.

"I remember the look on your face when I kissed your cheek last time. I want to see it again."

Okay, now she *had* to be messing with me.

Cautiously, I moved to another seat, but Dylan reached out, gently grabbing my sleeve to stop me. She flashed me the most innocent yet teasing smile I ever saw in a girl. It was no wonder why she was so popular.

"No, don't move away," she implored, looking genuinely apologetic. "I'll stay right here, I promise. You don't need to worry about me."

"...you promise?"

"Cross my heart! I admit I can be a troublemaker sometimes, but I'm really not *that* bad."

I shrugged. Well, if she was not going to give me trouble, then I had no reason to complain. Hopefully, this time, we can actually have a peaceful detention together.

I returned my focus to reading Hamlet, yet, as the minutes ticked by, I couldn't shake the feeling of Dylan's pale blue eyes boring holes into me, as if trying to unravel some hidden mystery.

She wanted something from me. I could tell. It seemed like every time we were together, she was seeking something from me.

"Dylan?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you... like being around me?"

Dylan seemed taken aback by the question, as if she wasn't expecting it. "What brought this on?"

"I just can't help but notice that you always seek me out. Even when we have group activities in class, you prefer to pair up with me. Is there a reason for that?"

Dylan offered a playful shrug. "Do I need a reason? I just like being around you, Emsy. School and tests don't matter much when I'm with you."

"...is that true?"

"Cross my heart, it is. You're fun to be around."

I ran my fingers through my brown hair, feeling somewhat embarrassed. I couldn't remember the last time anyone said that to me. But it still made me wonder what she saw in me. Given how taunting she could be, was she just toying with me? Or was there something else on her mind?

I turned my attention back to the book, determined to keep my focus on Hamlet. There would be time to unravel the mysteries of Dylan's actions later.

"To be or not to be... that is the question..."

"Where 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," Dylan quoted flawlessly, *"or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them. To die, to sleep, no more. By a sleep, to say we end the heartache, and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to?"*

I was floored by Dylan's recitation. It was as if I were watching an actress on stage. For the first time, she truly impressed me.

"Wow, you're really good."

"I told you," she replied with a giggle, "I read that a year ago. And I *still* think it's the most boring tripe ever. You know he's talking about suicide in that quote, right?"

"Wait, he is?"

"Yeah, he's contemplating suicide. He goes on and on about how much life sucks and is full of suffering, but he decides it's better to live because death is a worse alternative. What makes it weirder is that he's saying this to his girlfriend, Ophelia."

"Right. This is when he's telling her to go to a nunnery." I recalled, my mind still drifting between Shakespeare and the enigmatic girl sitting beside me. "Honestly, it makes me wonder why Ophelia and Hamlet are a couple; he treats her like trash."

"I get what he's trying to do, though," Dylan protested, her eyes lighting up with passion. "He's trying to protect her. He doesn't want her to get caught up in his schemes of having to murder his uncle. But if he would stop moping around and just tell her what he knows, then maybe she'd help him!"

Dylan's analysis totally blew me away. I mean, in class, she was the queen of mischief, but this girl was more than just a tease and a flirt. It was like discovering a whole new side of her, and it made me feel special that she shared it with me. It was like she transformed into this deep, insightful scholar who could understand and analyse characters and interpret the meanings of scenes. And she never flaunted this hidden talent in class—only around me. It was like our secret little world. Like having a personal magician reserving her best tricks just for me.

"You know," I realised just then, "it kinda surprises me that you don't say this stuff in class."

"Well," she smirked, a hint of playfulness in her eyes, "I think only you appreciate it. You're... not like the others."

Normally, I'd cringe at a cheesy line like that, but coming from Dylan, it made me curious. Maybe now I could finally get some answers from her about why she sought me out so often.

"What do you mean by that?"

Dylan hesitated for a moment, her fingers lightly brushing against a lock of hair she tucked behind her ear. Was she... blushing? I guess I would be, too, in a similar situation with her. I couldn't help but feel intrigued. Was she finally going to open up to me?

"Have I ever told you how many guys come up to me just to ask me out?"

"I imagine you get a lot of attention," I replied, trying to keep my tone neutral.

She snorted, indignation evident on her face. "More than I'd like, honestly. You know, whenever I ask them why, it's usually the same answer. *'Who wouldn't want to go out with you?'* or *'I think you're perfect for a guy like me.'* or *'I'll show you a good time.'* But I don't want a guy, Em. I want a friend. You and I are more alike than it seems. You couldn't give a damn about being popular, could you?"

I leaned back in my seat, surprised to hear all this from her. It wasn't a full answer, but it was a glimpse into her world, and I was grateful for it.

"Why would anyone care about being popular? It's a shallow and pointless pursuit. High school won't last forever, and popularity won't mean a thing in the real world. If I thought being popular was the ultimate goal of my time here, then my priorities would be seriously messed up."

Dylan chuckled softly. She rested her head on her hands; her gaze focused on me with an intense glow in her blue eyes that made my heart race.

"I love your simple logic, Emily," Dylan remarked, her tone almost admiring. "So, what *are* your priorities?"

"Me? I'd rather get through school in one piece. Get a good-paying job somewhere. Maybe go to a good college. Honestly, I don't really know. No one's asked me that before."

"Not even your parents?"

I returned to Hamlet at that moment, avoiding the intensity of her gaze. Dylan had pried a little too deeply, but I knew she didn't mean any harm. It wasn't her fault. I didn't blame her. "We... don't really talk about stuff like that..."

I continued reading, but every now and then, she would throw another question my way. Most were innocuous, about trivial things we couldn't even remember. Gradually, as time wore on and the sun began to dip, I felt myself nodding off.



"Wakey-wakey!"

Dylan's cheeky grin and her long golden tresses were the first things I saw when I opened my eyes. I had fallen asleep, and judging from the light outside, it was near the end of the day. Panicking, I scrambled, trying to get up but finding myself unable to move. Confused, I realised why.

My detention partner and all-around enigma of a classmate was now sitting on my lap, straddling me face-to-face. My books were scattered on the floor. What had just happened? And why was she sitting on me?

"You took quite a long nap," she said casually, fiddling with the sleeve of her jacket.

"Wait... I fell asleep? For how long? What time is it?"

"It's half past four. Detention will be over soon."

Her hands rested gently on my shoulders. Normally, I would be apprehensive, but—for whatever reason—I wasn't. I actually welcomed it. Maybe it was because Dylan seemed more than just a tease. Maybe she showed a different side to her, beyond the pranks and the mischief. Or maybe it was simply the look in her eyes that urged me to stay.

"You must've felt pretty comfortable with me to fall asleep."

"Why are you... sitting on my lap?"

"Hmm? Do I need a reason? Because I want to, silly. And it's easier for me to get at... this."

She gently tugged on my school tie, pulling it apart like a stray thread from a ball of yarn. My senses went into overdrive. What the hell was she planning? Was she going to strangle me? Choke me? My heart pounded with uncertainty and anticipation. I didn't know what to expect next, but with Dylan, there was always an element of surprise.

"Dylan, what are you...?"

She pressed a finger to my lips and winked.

"Shhhh... don't move. I just need to—"

With nimble fingers and a mischievous grin, she swiftly looped the red tie around my waist, securing it like an impromptu lasso for a bucking steer. The knot tightened, leaving me bound to the chair and entirely at her mercy. A sheen of sweat coated my brow. I knew she could be a prankster, but this was different from her usual antics; it felt more intense, like she was unveiling a hidden side of herself. My heart pounded in my chest as she stepped back, her eyes fixed on me like an artist admiring her masterpiece.

Dylan's smirk conveyed a sense of triumph, as if this was exactly what she wanted, and now she could finally do what she had longed to do since we first met. The scary glow in her eyes sent shivers down my spine; it was both thrilling and terrifying.

"There," she finished, her voice barely above a whisper. "Now you can't escape from me."

"Dylan...?"

"It's just the two of us in here, Emsy. We're all alone in the school." She chuckled to herself at the thought. "Geez, you'd wonder where the teachers are. They probably don't care anyway..."

"W—what are you going to do to me?" I asked fearfully. "I—I don't know what you want from me! Just tell me, and I'll do it!"

Her smirk widened, relishing the moment of control. She had me right where she wanted me.

"Anything?"

"Yes, please!"

"Hmmm... okay, then. All I want... is for you to trust me."

Before I could reply, her arms encircled my waist, pulling me close to her. All at once, a welcoming warmth of her body enveloped me, and the fear began to subside. She pulled me closer, close enough for me to smell her hair. It faintly reminded me of strawberries.

"Dylan... what—"

"You looked like you needed a hug," she whispered in my ear, her voice soft and tender. "I could hug you all day, Emy. I don't give a damn about school, or tests, or homework when I'm with you."

"...not even Hamlet?"

"Mm-mm. Not even that bloviating, wishy-washy Hamlet."

Dylan blushed. I couldn't remember ever hearing her say this to anyone, so why was she saying it to me? Was it because every boy who ever tried to do this with her only wanted her because she was pretty or turned out to be a social climber, looking to obtain her like some trophy? Maybe she only wanted a friend, and who better than a girl like me who would see her for more than just a pretty face? The thought stirred something inside me—a desire to be that person she could confide in and trust.

Carefully and anxiously, she leaned in, pressing her ear against my chest, and immediately my heart started beating faster than a hummingbird. It made her smile, but she withheld her laughter. Yet, I could

tell by her flushed cheeks and jagged breathing that this was something new for her as well, and the last thing she wanted was to scare me away.

"Is this supposed to be some kind of prank?" I asked, half-whispering, my curiosity tinged with amusement.

Her eyes widened. She shook her head. "No. I promise you, it's not. Right now, all I want to do is listen to your heartbeat."

She looked away, her face turning beet red, as if she couldn't believe she had just said that. And though her antics usually involved mischief, I could tell this was different because no sooner had she said those words, she buried her face into my school jacket and shirt.

"Ugh... that was too cheesy, even for me. Don't look at me right now..." she muttered, her voice muffled against the fabric.

"Don't you get embarrassed saying those things?"

"Yes... I mean... No... I—I'm saying it to the person I like."

Now she made me blush, too. I had been on the receiving end of her pranks and mischief before, but this time, it felt different. This time, there was a spark between us—a connection that couldn't be ignored. She did like me. And, despite myself... I liked her, too.

"Hey, Dylan?" I began, feeling my heart race even faster.

"Yeah?"

"Untie me, would you?" I asked, trying to sound casual.

She looked up from my chest, her eyes meeting mine. My heartbeat increased almost tenfold. Her eyes seemed to glimmer like the ocean at dusk, and I couldn't help but notice how charmingly dishevelled she looked, with a lock of hair falling gently across her forehead, making her look like she had just gotten out of bed. Did Dylan know just how effortlessly cute she could be?

Who was I kidding? Of course she did. She had an endless procession of guys asking her out all the time. But that wasn't good enough for her. Instead, she had to tease a dorky girl like me.

"Untie you?"

Dylan glanced at the tie, hesitant for a moment, as if contemplating her options. "Okay, then. But promise you won't do anything weird."

"I promise," I assured her.

Reluctantly, she reached for the necktie and tried to pull at the knot she had made. She soon found that she had tied it tighter than she had initially wanted. But gradually, with a bit of effort, she managed to pull the knot apart. At last, as she swiped off the tie and straightened it out, I made a move of my own.

"There, now what are you—"

Two lips pressed together, joining as one in tender union. In that instant, Dylan fell silent, and I found myself unsure about the reasons behind this unexpected connection. Instinctively, I wrapped my arms around her waist, and to my surprise, she didn't resist or protest. Perhaps she enjoyed it, or at least I hoped so. Dylan was more than a flirt; she was an enigma, a mystery wrapped in a riddle. But she was also a girl who sought something that boys couldn't provide. Just as I did.

As our lips parted, Dylan placed her hands on her chest, her eyes wide with astonishment. Though she had been forward countless times before, she clearly hadn't expected me to take charge and turn the tables on her. And now, despite her initial shock, she was hardly miffed by it all. In fact, she appeared relieved... and even giddy.

"Wh—who said you could kiss me?" she stammered, trying to regain her composure.

"S—Sorry," I whispered, contrite and embarrassed. "Should I not have?"

"No, that's not it at all. I just didn't expect you to do that. And I do believe it was *you* who complained about being stuck in detention."

"Yeah, well, that was before you told me you liked me. That wasn't a lie, was it?"

"No, it's the truth. Every last word of it."

"But I don't understand, Dylan. Why me, of all people?"

One of her hands found its place under my shoulder as she smiled, leaning back into me.

"You could be dense sometimes, Emster. You never seem to get the message, be it a rub on the leg or my scheming to get both of us into detention," she smirked, as if now was the perfect moment to come clean. "Do you remember when we first met? It was on the first day of school..."

I searched through my memories, recalling that chaotic first day filled with confusion and misplaced locker numbers. It was particularly hectic, with me dashing to and fro and struggling to remember my teachers' names. But there was one distinct moment that stood out.

"You were on your way to class, and you got lost," I recalled, the memory unfolding before me like a movie scene. Dylan nodded.

"We shared the same class, and you offered to show me the way. You were so nice... and pretty... And when I saw your rainbow bracelet, I thought this was my lucky chance. I never thought I'd fall in love with a girl—a girl who approached me without wanting something from me in return. I think it must've been the first time that happened to me. So... thank you."

"You don't have to thank me. I would've done it for anyone."

"I know. And that's why I like you so much..." She sighed; a weight lifted off her shoulders. "You have no idea how long I've wanted to say that."

Just then, the bell sounded, abruptly ending our moment of intimacy. Dylan let out another sigh, a hint of disappointment lingering in her eyes, yet overall appearing content after finally confessing her

feelings. It was evident that she had accomplished what she set out to do—to unburden herself from the weight she carried. And for me, her confession provided some clarity, though not all the answers I sought. Still, it was enough to bring some peace of mind, knowing that there might be another chance for the rest.

As I gathered my scattered books from the floor, Dylan stopped me and handed me my copy of Hamlet.

"Hey, thanks for listening to me. I promise this is the last time I'll get you in trouble. You won't have to come back to detention... unless you want to."

I stood up and took the book from her. "Honestly, I'd prefer to see you somewhere else. I don't think a girl like you should be cooped up in a place like this."

Dylan beamed, as if expecting my response. "Say, how about tomorrow we go somewhere for lunch? I know this nice little ice cream parlour we can eat at if you want."

Well, it was certainly better than sitting in detention all day. "Sure thing. I'll see you there."

"Thanks, Em. I really mean it," she smiled warmly.

With that, she placed a gentle kiss on my cheek before darting out of the room, leaving me to watch her go like a fleeting pixie. She was more than just a flirt and a tease; she was more than just a popular girl with a pretty face. Behind that façade, she sought respect and recognition. And most importantly, she longed for someone to love.

But that left me wondering: Is there no one else in her life who could love her back but me?



The lunch bell rang like a liberating anthem, signalling a brief escape from the confines of the school. But for me, it was a reminder of my commitment to Dylan. No sooner had my science class ended than I pushed my way through the bustling halls, out of the crowded main building, and headed towards the front gates.

I had chosen not to tell anyone about Dylan yet. Even though I did like her, and even though I did enjoy the time we spent together, it felt premature to call ourselves a couple. Indeed, I still sensed Dylan was hiding something from me. There was an unspoken truth lingering in her words that resonated within me like the tolling of a church bell on a serene Sunday morning:

A girl who approached me without wanting something from me in return.

I couldn't imagine that being possible. Were all the people in her life truly so shallow? Was I the only one treating her like a person, not an object to exploit or lust after? Something more was at play beneath the surface. I just knew it. But how could I unlock the truth?

As I pondered these thoughts, the impish girl came into my view. Leaning on the front gate, she kicked away a small pebble with the front of her shoe, passing the time while waiting. She wore the identical school uniform to mine—a blue blazer over a crisp white shirt, a red string tie, and a matching plaid skirt that came down to mid-thigh. Her navy-blue socks reached up to her knees.

Had she confided in anyone else about our recent interactions? I couldn't shake the lingering doubt that somehow this was all one of her elaborate pranks. Then again, she had to go to extreme lengths to keep up this charade, including organising a "date". Either way, I would soon uncover the truth.

"Oh, hey, Emsy!" Dylan waved to me, smiling brightly. I returned the wave as I ran up to her, manoeuvring through the crowd that stood in my way. I couldn't explain it, but I feared that if I lost sight of her, I would lose her forever.

What was it about her that stirred such strong emotions within me? It hadn't been a long time since we started spending time together, nor did we know each other exceptionally well. Her story of our first meeting played on repeat in my mind. To me, it was an ordinary encounter. To her, it was a life-changing event. But why? The mystery weighed on my thoughts.

Approaching her, I couldn't help but feel a hint of caution, as if she were a slumbering bear. Dylan noticed my hesitance immediately and rolled her eyes, chuckling.

"You can drop the act, you know. I told you before this isn't a joke."

"S-sorry. I guess... I'm still getting used to this... To having a girlfriend. Uh—I didn't keep you waiting for long, did I?"

"I thought you'd *never* show up!" she teased, feigning irritation. "I've been here for hours!"

My eyes narrowed in mock suspicion. Even now, Dylan still proved to have a whimsical sense of humour. Maybe it was one of the reasons why I didn't turn her away. I enjoyed her company. She had a knack for turning any situation into a joke, and somehow, she always managed to make me laugh.

"Hardy-har-har," I returned, deadpan. "You're a real riot."

"Thanks!" she chirped, laughing. "I try. So, you ready?"

"Yeah, I sure am. Lead the way."

Dylan pointed across the street, guiding us towards the downtown business section near the town centre. On one side, directly opposite the school, sat a supermarket, while a row of quaint stores that resembled dollhouses lined the main street. Carefully navigating through the crowd of students heading for the supermarket, I was grateful that we weren't joining them. I preferred quieter places, away from the noise of bustling crowds.

"Say, Dylan, where exactly is this ice cream place you told me about?"

"Oh, it's just a little place a couple blocks down. C'mon! Just follow me!"

She tugged at my blazer sleeve, and I found myself following her lead. She was so energetic and bouncy in her step that I had to quicken my pace to keep up with her.

When I finally managed to come alongside her, she surprised me by quickly taking my hand in hers. My heart skipped a beat; this was the first time I held a girl's hand in public. Her touch was gentle, her skin warm against mine.

My eyes darted around, afraid of being caught. What if someone from school saw us together? I could already imagine the rumours spreading like wildfire the next day.

However, Dylan seemed unfazed, as if she couldn't care less about others' opinions. Unsurprising, given how she turned down every boy who ever came up to her.

"Dylan... aren't you embarrassed?" I couldn't help but whisper, my cheeks flushing slightly.

"About what?" she responded casually, a playful glint in her eyes.

"Y—you know..." I motioned towards our entwined hands, hoping she would understand my unease. Dylan caught on immediately and rolled her eyes, smirking. It seemed she enjoyed how her actions affected me.

"Oh, please. We're just holding hands, Emy! It's not like we're making out in public."

"But... aren't you afraid of someone seeing us?"

"No, not really. Why? Are you?"

"Well... kinda. C'mon, Dylan. You know what would happen if someone from school saw us now."

The smile faded from Dylan's face like an outgoing tide. "If I cared about that, I wouldn't be here with you, now would I, Emily?"

I bit my lip, contemplating her words. Dylan was certainly a brave girl. It was actually refreshing to find someone like her. Despite her popularity, she didn't flaunt it or discriminate in her interactions with her classmates, at least not from what I could see.

I also hoped Dylan didn't misinterpret my hesitation. My aversion to seeking popularity was something I had been vocal about, but this was different. Was I ashamed of being with her? Yes, I had my rainbow bracelet hidden safely beneath my sleeve, but what did it really mean if I couldn't even bring myself to hold her hand?

"Emy, have you told anyone that we're... together?"

"No, I haven't. Have you?"

Dylan shook her head. "I... don't think I'm comfortable telling people just yet. Besides, it makes it a little more fun that way. It's like our own naughty little secret."

Her choice of words made me mentally wince. "You make it sound like we're doing more than just dating..."

"Give it a bit of time," she said, flashing a playful grin. "We only just became a couple yesterday."

I couldn't help but groan at her relentless teasing, but it didn't dampen my feelings for her. I needed to focus on the present, on the joy of being with her.

"So, uh... where's this ice cream place? Have you been there before?"

"Oh, sure. Plenty of times. It's a little mom-and-pop store. I'd go there all the time with my parents when I was little. You'll like it..."

She pointed at a sign with neon lighting that read "Chilly Eye Scream" in flashing letters. I chuckled to myself. The ice cream parlour was housed in a quaint one-story building, its faded brick and white clapboard giving it a nostalgic charm. A narrow alleyway provided a shaded pathway between the parlour and a nearby florist.

"Here we are!" Dylan pushed the door open, ringing a bell perched on top.

The parlour had a charmingly vintage aesthetic, reminiscent of diners from my parents' and grandparents' time. I couldn't help but wonder how long this place had been around.

A waiter dressed in all white greeted us with a friendly wave as we entered. Dylan nodded and requested a table for two. With a smile, the waiter led us to a circular wooden table with red-cushioned chairs, offering a perfect view of the outside through the window. We settled down and picked up the menus.

"Can I get you two started with something to drink?" the waiter asked, pen poised over his pad.

"Water with lemon for me, please," Dylan replied.

"Same thing for me," I followed suit.

"Comin' right up. Take your time with ordering."

I opened up the menu and was immediately overwhelmed. For a little hole-in-the-wall establishment, they had quite a lot of speciality ice creams and treats to choose from. I glanced over at my date, seeing she was equally captivated by the choices as she scanned the menu, and it was in that moment that I couldn't help but notice just how beautiful she was.

Her long, curly, buttery-yellow tresses cascaded over her shoulders like a shroud of golden thread covering Venus herself, while her blue eyes, still scanning the menu, had an almost sultry lustre to them. Her school uniform hid her figure well, though I could still make out some budding contours and curves that hinted at her growing maturity. Her fingers and hands almost disappeared beneath her sleeves, giving her a touch of innocence, as if she were a little girl pretending to be bigger by wearing her mother's shirt.

I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something more to her than meets the eye. I had no way of knowing for sure, but maybe that mischievous, quirky front was just that—a front. She was hiding something. I was sure of it. If she could confide in me that I was the only girl she truly liked, a girl who saw past her pretty face, then maybe she could reveal something more about herself.

"Mmmh, I can't decide what to get!" Dylan pouted. "What about you?"

"I—I was kinda hoping you'd have a recommendation."

"Oh, you're stuck, too, huh? Well, I don't blame you. The menu is kinda overwhelming. But if I had to give you one piece of advice, don't get the big scoop. When they say big, they're not joking. It'll melt before you even finish it!"

"Well, we only have lunchtime anyway. I think I'll just go for a plain hot fudge sundae then."

"Can't go wrong with that."

A moment of silence fell between us, and I felt a growing unease, like a stubborn weed creeping up. My cheeks turned a shade of red, while Dylan, the teenage temptress, simply smiled. It was obvious that this was a first time for me. It was also her first time experiencing this kind of moment, although she hardly seemed bothered by it.

As we waited for the waiter to return to take our orders, I wondered if this was the moment to dig deeper, to inquire about her life and feelings. But before I could gather my thoughts, the waiter was back at our table.

After placing our orders, we found ourselves once again enveloped in the same silence as before.

"So..." Dylan said at last, "how's everything been on your end? Hamlet going okay?"

"Yeah, I guess. I'm kind of lost when it comes to the character analysis homework. I mean, I really want to go all out and just say what you've been saying."

"Oh... you mean...?"

"That Hamlet is a mopey emo bitch who needs to just take action instead of overthinking everything he does."

Dylan almost burst into laughter at my response. It seemed she was rubbing off on me in more ways than one—just as she had hoped, I guess.

"That'd be the shortest character analysis ever. I think the teacher wouldn't really like that, though, no matter how right and to the point it is."

"See, that's what I don't like. In all our homework, we have to bullshit and fluff it to make it more complicated than necessary. It's like we're not allowed to be straightforward," I replied, frustration evident in my voice.

"Me neither, but it's just something we're expected to do." Dylan leaned in, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. "Say, Emsy, how about you come over to my place one day? We can knock out some of that work... and if you want, we could—"

I blushed at the unspoken suggestion. We had only been dating for a day, and she was already inviting me over to her place. This was moving faster than I ever thought possible. It meant meeting her

parents, explaining our relationship to them, and dealing with many other prospects that were better suited for a later time in our romance.

"W-what about your parents, Dylan? Have you even told them about me? Do they know you like girls?"

"Oh, don't worry about them. I live alone."

Those last three words hit me like a tsunami. She lived alone? Suddenly, so many things made sense. No wonder she had pursued me so persistently. No wonder she had schemed to get us both in detention together. No wonder she had clung to me after our first meeting.

In an instant, thoughts of my homework and Hamlet vanished. Instead, I only wanted to understand her situation better and figure out how I could be there for her.

"You...?"

"You can come over anytime you want. Here, I'll give you my number..."

She wrote it down on a white napkin and handed it to me. I quickly added her to my contacts, but now it was more out of concern for her than anything else. This weekend, I will have to visit her and understand her situation better.

Just then, the waiter brought over our orders. I had a modest hot fudge sundae with a cherry on top, while Dylan received a delicious-looking strawberry parfait. We thanked the waiter and immediately dug in.

As I enjoyed the sweet treat, the three words "I live alone" kept echoing in my mind. It seemed incomprehensible that she was completely on her own. We were just eighth graders, after all. How long had she lived like this? Did she have no other friends besides me? Was I the only person who reached out to her? Perhaps she wasn't even looking for a girlfriend; she just wanted a friend.

"Dylan... when you said you lived alone, what did you mean?" I asked, my curiosity and concern competing with each other.

Dylan raised an eyebrow in confusion as she scooped a spoonful of strawberry ice cream into her mouth.

"Just that. I live alone. What more is there to say?"

"But you just turned fourteen... How can you not have *anyone* at home?"

"Of course, my mom lives there, but we never see each other. She's mostly at work, anyway."

"What about your friends? Don't they ever come over?"

Dylan avoided my gaze, her cheeks turning as red as her strawberry ice cream. Now I was sure something was amiss.

"Well, I have friends, obviously—"

"That's not what I asked, Dylan."

She let out a sigh and prodded her parfait with her spoon, seemingly lost in thought.

"It's just that... I hang out with them more than they do with me. I like their company and all, but it's not like we're particularly close. As a matter of fact, I can't remember the last time I invited anyone over to my house..." She set her spoon down and leaned in. "You know, Emsy, you're the first person I've ever told about anything like this. So... yeah..."

I was taken aback, and the delicious sundae melting in my mouth lost its sweetness. Behind all her flirting and teasing, there was a lonely young girl. It was a feeling I could easily relate to. Loneliness hung over my life too, like a dark cloud overshadowing a bright beach.

"I'll tell you what," I offered. "How about I come over tomorrow? I can't stay the entire night, but I can at least make you company."

At that suggestion, Dylan's face brightened, and she downed another scoop of her parfait. "That... actually sounds really nice. We can even work on Hamlet."

"Forget about Hamlet for now. Let's just... hang out and have some fun."

Dylan chuckled softly. She never thought I would suggest it first, but it was a pleasant surprise—one she gladly welcomed. It had been so quiet in her house for the longest time, and she desperately needed company.

"Sounds like a... date, then. I'll see you tomorrow, then. And, Emily?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks. I mean that."

"You don't have to thank me, Dylan. I'm happy to do it."

A clock on the wall chimed, indicating that our lunchtime was almost over. We had to head back to school. And I had to prepare for what was to come. The mystery of Dylan only grew and grew.



Ding-dong

I tapped my foot nervously on the front step while waiting for the doorbell to be answered. Instead of worrying about what mischief Dylan might pull, my thoughts were consumed by concern for her. I wondered why she had opened up to me about her loneliness, something no one else knew. If she was brave enough to confide in me like that, then...

My mind was filled with questions. Was she going through a tough time at home? Was her family life in shambles? Was she neglected? Unloved? Abandoned? What was the true situation at her home?

Looking up at the house, I saw a rather modest two-story home with a clapboard exterior and a black tiled roof. The windowsills had white doilies, and the front door had a bit of shelter, resembling the style of the Greek Parthenon. The neighbourhood was quiet and unassuming, much like my own. With the evening approaching, the only light came from the soft glow emanating from the surrounding houses.

Behind the pine door, I heard light footsteps and the turning of a lock. I gulped in anticipation, and my heart pounded in my chest.

The door swung open, revealing a girl dressed in a white T-shirt with a large pink heart over her chest. She had a loose-fitting black hoodie sweater wrapped around her, while her legs were bare thanks to a pair of blue running shorts. It was so strange seeing her out of her school uniform, but all the same, she looked adorable. More so than she normally did. This was by design, I thought. This was her way of drawing me in.

"Come on in, Emster!" Dylan chirped, greeting me warmly with a smile. "So glad you came. It's... different seeing you in normal clothes."

I guess seeing me out of my school uniform was different for Dylan, too. I wore a plain black T-shirt with worn denim jeans and a pair of canvas sneakers. Unassuming, and easy to blend in. I was eager to just fade into the shadows, but she was determined to pull me out and make me stand in the sun with her.

"Y-yeah, I was gonna say the same about you," I replied, feeling a bit hesitant. "It feels more... casual."

"Well, are you going to stand out there all night? Please come in."

I entered the house, and was immediately struck by the interior. The high ceiling, timber floors, and even the avant-garde paintings on the beige walls made me think she was relatively well-off.

"M-my shoes..." I stammered. "Should I... umm...?"

"Oh, you can leave them there," she said. "It doesn't really matter since my mom isn't home."

My mom isn't home.

Was she ever at home? Did she even care about her daughter at all?

"Dylan... where *are* your parents?"

A shift in her gaze towards her bare feet and a biting of her lower lip betrayed something deeper, darker.

"Well... my dad doesn't live with us. He lives overseas because of work-related stuff. And mom is at work until late, except on Sundays."

"So you're *always* alone?"

"Um... yeah. But I don't mind," she shook her pretty head, blonde tresses flying about in all directions. "Really, I don't. At least they're not bugging me all the time, you know. Sometimes at night, it can get lonely, though, since no one is here, but I got used to it."

A lever seemed to be pulled in her mind, and her spirits perked back up. She sported the same mischievous smile that I couldn't help but love. Was it genuine, or was it a cry for help?

"But why should I complain? I have you now, Em."

Dylan strode up to me and planted a playful peck on my lips. I tried to hide my blush, but I was as transparent as a clear summer sky.

"That's for coming over today," she whispered. "If you keep being good, I'll give you more rewards."

I smirked despite myself. Sometimes Dylan can be incredibly cute. Whether it was a front or genuine was something I had to find out. She chuckled at my reaction.

"What's that smirk? Could it be you're becoming used to me?"

"Well... maybe."

"Don't get too excited. We have plenty of time to ourselves."

Dylan pulled me further into the house, our bare feet pattering on the wooden floors. Everything echoed, singing a song of a girl in desperate need of a friend. The hall split off into various rooms. On my right was a living room, complete with an entertainment centre and a large-screen television. I spotted a video game console sitting on the coffee table before an upholstered couch with a bunch of cosy pillows.

So, she plays games, too. I wondered which were her favourites.

A little further down was a kitchen painted entirely white, from the cabinets and cupboards to the cooktop. A refrigerator, microwave, and dishwasher all plated in chrome popped out, shiny and new.

Dylan seemed to read my mind. "You hungry? I can make you something," she asked.

"You can cook?"

"Well, of course!" she laughed. "I have to be good at cooking since mom rarely has time for preparing meals."

I paused. It made sense that she would know how to cook.

"Don't worry," Dylan joked. "I promise I won't spike your food or anything."

"That's... not really funny, Dylan." I shook my head. "A-anyway, I'm not hungry right now. Maybe a little later."

"Okay. I'll make you something for dinner then—"

We took a turn to the left and came to a carpeted staircase. I paused as Dylan went up the steps first. My eyes inadvertently wandered to her slim, bare legs. Her tight running shorts left little to the

imagination. Her skin was soft and very, very kissable. Near her ankles, I noticed the marks where socks left soft indentations in her skin before she took them off.

About halfway up the stairs, she stopped and glanced over her shoulder, briefly catching me mid-stare. She stifled a small laugh. So she caught me red-handed, but in the presence of such a beautiful girl, even I couldn't help myself.

"Are you just going to stand there, or are you going to follow me up to my room?"

At that reminder, I visibly sweated and stammered. Dylan struggled to contain her laughter as I trotted up the steps to the second level of the house. We turned left and found a room at the end of the hallway with a sign reading "Dylan" in large, bold, pink letters. Her room.

"This is probably your first date in a girl's room, isn't it?" she asked, her voice simmering with mischief.

I gulped. Indeed, it was my first time. I never had a girlfriend or earned romantic attention of a girl. My attraction to girls was safely contained within my fantasies. Until now.

Upon entering her room, I found it rather ordinary. There was a canopy bed with plain white linens and thick pillows, while a leather couch sat at the front, both of which faced the TV screen. A small black box was nestled just below it, with a power light switched to green.

I looked around, noticing a chest of drawers facing the door and an elaborately designed mirror on top. As I explored, Dylan gave me a wry smile.

"Are you looking for something? Because I can assure you that I've already hidden it."

I sighed and ran my fingers through my hair. I needed to calm down and just trust Dylan. She had agreed to invite me into her home and go on a date with me. If this was one of her tricks, it had to be the most elaborate one in existence.

Dylan turned on the television, tuning it to a streaming service. She landed bottom-first on the couch with a soft bounce, sporting the smile of a playful child. It was like a dream come true for her now that I was finally here. And the best part was that we had all the time in the world to spend together.

"Let's watch something for a while. Do you have anything in particular you like?"

"Uh... whatever you want, Dylan."

I settled onto the couch beside her, pondering for a moment. Looking at the movie selections and glancing at Dylan, her eagerness was palpable. The genuine beam on her face and the sparkle in her eyes didn't give a hint of insincerity. She really wanted company. Perhaps even more than just a friend.

"Well... I actually enjoy films in which girls fall in love with other girls," I decided to drop a hint.

"What do you mean? Like... lesbian movies?"

"*Romantic* movies. Not porn. Stuff like *Show Me Love* or *Bloomington*."

"Oh, I've seen *Bloomington* before! I remember watching it on Netflix one time when I was at home sick with a cold. Let me see if they have it..."

She searched and searched, scooting closer to me until her warm body was pressed against mine. She removed her hoodie, revealing the T-shirt with the cute pink heart on it. At the sensation of her skin on mine, a chill ran up my spine. Even though we had been a lot closer in detention and between classes, this intimate touch still managed to make my heart race.

Sure enough, the site had *Bloomington*.

"Well, what do you know? We're in luck..."

She nestled into me like a comfy pillow, and somewhat hesitantly, I put my arm around her shoulder as the movie started. The first few minutes ticked by, and we both found ourselves engrossed in the plot. When the first kiss between Catherine and Jackie happened, Dylan groaned, squirming.

"This position I'm in is *really* uncomfortable..."

"Want me to move?"

"No, you're fine right where you are. Hold on..."

She swung her legs and hips around and scooted closer to me until she was resting on my lap. If I was hesitant about this before, now I was practically shaking. But then again, it was to be expected. Dylan had shown herself to be forward and touchy when she wanted to be. She nuzzled into my shoulder and wrapped both arms around me as if I were a teddy bear, and she desperately needed to hold on tight. But what was she afraid of falling into?

"There we go. Much better."

"Dylan... you're really fine with this? I mean, we're kinda close... more than usual..."

"Stop complaining, Emsy," she teased. "You're not a little kid anymore. Besides..." She gazed up into my eyes and laughed. "You're really cute when you're embarrassed."

She had a point. Despite trying to act mature and composed, I was as much a neophyte in the realm of romance as she was. I guess that's what she loved about me.

"I can *obviously* see that... you're en—enjoying it," I stammered.

I suddenly felt a sense of warmth and comfort as Dylan squeezed me tightly as if I were her favourite toy. Yes, Dylan was undeniably quirky, but I enjoyed having her around. There was something enchanting about her presence, and there was never a dull moment with her, if my time in detention was any indication. Maybe I should just embrace her chaos and go with the flow. After all, I was here to support her and be the company she needed.

As the credits rolled, bringing us back to the main screen, we fell into a moment of silence, lost in each other's eyes. We had thoroughly enjoyed ourselves, even more than I had expected, but now my thoughts were consumed by Dylan. Our mutual attraction hadn't followed the most conventional path,

but then again, Dylan wasn't the most "conventional" of girls. And despite myself, I couldn't help but like that.

"Say..." I suggested, unconsciously drawing closer to her like a magnet, "wanna watch something else? Maybe some anime?"

"S-sure... we could watch that..." she stammered, the soft light from the TV illuminating her beautiful face.

As she turned her gaze to the screen, the power went out, and a sudden blackout engulfed the room, shrouding everything in darkness. The television turned to black, and even the hum of the air conditioner ceased. Startled, Dylan jumped and squeaked, her arms hugging me tighter in the sudden darkness.

"Whoa... that's strange," she thought aloud. "Why the heck did the power go out? Is there a...?"

BOOM! CRASH!

A loud thunderclap answered her question before she could even ask it, making her shriek in concert with me. A freak storm had blown in, leaving us trapped in a room, surrounded by darkness, with no way out.

And that's when Dylan got an idea. A very mischievous idea. Little did she know that I had a similar idea forming in my own head.

"I... wasn't expecting this. But now that I think about it, it does make for a more... romantic mood? Wouldn't you...?"

"Dylan?" I whispered.

"Yeah, Emsy?"

"Stop talking."

Our lips met in the dark. Though taken by surprise, Dylan responded with eagerness. In the hushed atmosphere, all we could hear were our shared breath and the occasional moans that escaped Dylan's lips. Her grip on me tightened until she was practically rending my shirt asunder.

Lost in the haze of love and passion, I continued my amorous exploration, kissing her neck gently, eliciting yet another moan from her lips. I couldn't tell if it was from surprise or the warmth of the moment. As she fell back, I followed suit, tracing a trail of kisses from her lips down to her neck, savouring the tender skin beneath my touch. Her moans intensified, blending with the hot tension in the air.

"Well, look at you," she breathed with a hint of surprise. "Bold enough to make the first move. Unexpected, but I like it."

"Like you said earlier," I whispered in her little seashell ear, "I'm getting used to you now."

Dylan chuckled softly, her response in that enveloping darkness as enchanting as ever, before gently pushing me away. What she did next made my cheeks blush crimson.

With deft hands and a graceful sway of her body, she pulled up on the hem of her T-shirt, raising it over her head to expose herself to my astonished eyes. She caught me leering at her light blue bra, trimmed with white frills and a small white bow in the centre, and laughed.

"My eyes are up here, silly," she frowned.

"Dylan, why...?"

"I wanted to reward you... for coming over."

I raised an eyebrow, unconvinced. "What about that kiss at the door?"

"Well, yeah, that was a reward, too, but I wanted to give you something more..."

"I don't understand."

"Here, allow me to show you..."

She led me by the hand to her bed and pushed me gently on top of the bedspread. I was enveloped in the sweet, strawberry scent of her teenage fragrance, residing in the thick layers of her bedsheets and pillows. The softness beneath me and her scent around me were so intoxicating, I might as well have landed in a bed of marshmallows and rainbows.

Before I could ask any questions, Dylan sauntered over me and straddled me, effectively trapping me on her bed between her bare, coltish legs. A devious smirk played on her pretty face as she narrowed the space between us, running her hands along my shoulders.

"Emily..." she whispered, her voice an enchanting brew of coy flirtatiousness and innocent anxiety.

"Y—yeah...?" I answered, uncertain.

"Do you want to... sleep with me?"

My heart seemed to freeze in my chest. I knew Dylan was bold and daring, but this was beyond anything she had ever attempted with me. Even tying me up with my own tie in detention couldn't compare to this. Her eyes were an eyelash's length away from mine, and I could feel the warmth of her breath against my skin.

"Dylan, do you know what you're saying?" I managed to say, my voice shaky.

She nodded, her words tinged with anxiety. "Yes... I—I'd be okay with it." Cupping my face in her hands, she leaned in and kissed me gently, but tremors in every move revealed hesitation and nervousness in her body.

I knew something was off. There was more to this than meets the eye. Even being a flirt, this was pushing all her boundaries. Her loneliness, her lack of parental figures, and her willing attachment to me fit together like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle.

Taking a deep breath, I took her hands in mine as our lips parted from the kiss, and quietly said, "Sorry, but I can't."

Dylan stopped and sat on my legs, looking at me with an intensity I hadn't seen in her before. Her blue eyes drifted down, seemingly disappointed. Desperate not to break her heart, I gently ran my hands up to her shoulders. She wasn't just a flirt or a girl seeking casual encounters; she was a young girl desperate for friendship and support.

"Dylan, I care about you too much to do that, at least for now. Whenever your parents *do* come back, I want to proudly tell them I love you. You might think I'm just being stupid and old-fashioned, but I think something like that should be saved for a special moment. When we're both ready."

I let my arms fall to my sides, feeling as if my own strength had deserted me. At least I spoke the truth. I did love her and wanted to be there for her, but things were moving too fast, and I was scared.

"I—I'm sorry to let you down like this..." I apologised, hiding my eyes in shame.

I expected her to lash out at me. I expected her to berate me for throwing away a golden opportunity. I expected her to reveal some grand deception. And in a way, there was a deception. Just not the one I had imagined.

"No, Emily... don't be. Actually... I'm rather relieved."

Her words lifted my spirits in the dim room. Was it possible that she never intended to go through with it?

"You are?"

She smiled and nodded. "It just proves that you really do care about me; that you're serious about... us. Honestly, I'm the one who should apologise."

"What do you mean?"

"Well..." Dylan began, rubbing her bare arm as if trying to scratch an itch, her movements accentuating her small, round breasts.

"The truth is, things have been... really lonely for me lately. And I enjoy being with you. So, I wanted to..."

She inched closer to me until my forehead rested against hers and our noses gently touched. Then her arms wrapped around me as if she were afraid to let go. With all her secrets flowing over, she blushed enough to light up the room. Her vulnerability was on full display, but since I had revealed my true feelings, it was time for her to show me who she truly was.

"I wanted to be sure that I was right about you. I can't tell you how many times I've been approached by guys, and every time they want just one thing. I'm done with them, Em. I like you because you're a girl and because you genuinely care about... well... me. So... thanks for proving me right."

Her slender finger gently traced along my cheek in gratitude. With a soft sigh, she rested her cheek on my shoulder.

"I get lonely here often, so you have to come over a lot, okay?"

"Of course, Dylan... I'd be glad to."

No sooner had she said those words than my arms enveloped her bare back. I pressed her close to me like a child would a beloved toy. Dylan stifled a gasp at the move that wrapped her in bliss.

"Emily, what...?"

"I thought you needed a hug," I said simply.

Dylan nuzzled deeper into my embrace, not minding her flushed cheeks or her half-undressed state. She was safe with me. She was with a girl, and so was I.

"Thanks, Emsy. No one's ever thought much about my feelings. Sadly, not even my parents. But... you do, and it's pretty damn nice."

"It sounds like you've been hanging around with a bunch of jerks."

"Yeah... I guess I have. I'm just glad I have you now." She leaned in and placed another soft kiss on my lips, and immediately blushed. "So... what does this make us now?"

"I'd say," I noted, "we're... girlfriends."

"So we are. But, uh... I have a confession to make."

"Oh?"

Dylan rested her chin on my shoulder and whispered words that left me stunned. For someone as flirty and forward as her, I could have never anticipated what she revealed next.

"I've never dated anyone before now. Everything I've done with you was my first time."

"Wait... are you serious? You've never dated anyone before me?"

"Mm-mm. Never. Surprised?"

"Y-yeah, I am. I mean, anyone would kill to be with you. Boys and girls. To be honest, for the longest time, I thought that this was some kind of prank, like what you do in school sometimes. So hearing that... is really, uh... surprising."

Dylan didn't seem the least bit offended and only laughed. "I know I can be a real tease, but... I just wanted you to notice me. Like I said, I get lonely a lot, and there's no one I'm especially close with at school. Besides you, that is. Anyway, just promise you won't make fun of me for it, okay?"

I gently stroked her hair and brushed her cheek with one finger. Finally, I had a sense of who she was. She was more than just a quirky girl; she was just desperate for someone to whom she could pour out her anxieties and fears. Our friendship hadn't blossomed in the most traditional way; our relationship

was never really "traditional" to begin with. But it hardly mattered to me. I was just happy that I could make her smile. Make her laugh. Make her open up about who she truly is.

"I'd never make fun of you, Dylan. Not ever."

As if on cue, the lights flickered to life, and the air conditioning hummed back into action, nearly blinding both of us with the sudden brightness. Standing up, we readjusted our dishevelled clothes, Dylan slipping her T-shirt back on, as the cool air washed over us once more. Her cheeks blushed before she turned to face me.

"Um... Emsy?"

"Yeah, Dylan?"

"I... don't know about you, but I'm getting kinda hungry. I can cook us something if you want."

"Uh... sure. What's on your mind?"

"Hmmm... I've got some crab cakes in the freezer that I could make."

"Oh, I love crab cakes!" I exclaimed. "Sounds perfect. Want me to help you?"

Dylan only smiled and playfully tugged at my hand.

"Yeah... that'd be nice. Thanks babe. And maybe while we're eating, we can knock out some of that Hamlet homework."

"Sure thing," I agreed, and then called out to her. "Hey, Dylan, do you know why Hamlet takes so long in the bathroom?"

Her puzzled expression was too adorable. "Wha—? The bathroom? No... why?"

"He can't decide to pee or not to pee."

We both fell on each other, laughing like two lunatics.

The End